

# HMCS Ville de Québec Protects Humanitarian Aid from Somali Pirates

By Hon. Richard Hurlburt

The legends of swashbuckling Sir Francis Drake, Captain Kidd and Captain Morgan, and even the Disney movies of Pirates of the Caribbean have romanticized pirates and piracy. But the reality is far different than the legends. Piracy is alive and well and preying on ships off the coast of the east African nation of Somalia.

This causes many Canadians to see that piracy is “over there,” on the far side of the world, and without any need for us to be concerned. Many simply and simplistically believe that Somalia does not affect our interests.

Somalia hasn't had a lasting and functional central government since 1991, and has been in a state of civil anarchy since. At the same time, a catastrophic drought has plunged the people into unrelenting impoverishment, with more than one million internally displaced persons. Almost three and a half million Somalis need the food aid assistance delivered by the UN World Food Programme (WFP), and 90 per cent arrives by sea.

Pirates have been seizing merchant vessels within sight of land since 2004. The coastal waters of Somalia are virtually unpoliced. Only last summer, these dangers caused the World Food Programme to suspend sea-borne food deliveries for 2 months, until Canada assigned the Halifax-based ship *HMCS Ville de Québec* to naval escort responsibilities on August 6.

Prior to being assigned to this operation, *Ville de Québec* participated in the Standing NATO Maritime Group 1 (SNMG1) fleet, named *Operation SEXTANT*, patrolling the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean. She is scheduled to return to Canada Monday, December 22.

*Ville de Québec* provided naval escort for 10 ships contracted by the WFP, ensuring the safety for these ships as they delivered 36 million kilograms of food aid to Somalia, enough to feed 400 thousand people for 6 months, and discouraged piracy attacks on the ships carrying food aid.

The ship's humanitarian mission was originally scheduled to end September 27<sup>th</sup>. However, the World Food Programme's request of an extension of her mandate to allow more time to arrange for a replacement naval es-

escort added another month to this operation.

But attacks against ships in this region don't only target WFP vessels.

This year, attacks have more than doubled and moved into the Gulf of Aden, off the coast of Puntland, among the poorest areas of impoverished Somalia.

According to the Royal Institute for International Affairs, some 16 thousand ships pass through here, carrying Middle Eastern oil, and Asian goods and commodities to Europe and North America. This is one of the most important trade routes in the world, and it cuts through one of the

most dangerous bodies of water in the world.

Somalia provides the perfect environment for piracy, with the motivation of huge ransoms. For example, the captors of the Motor Vessel *Stella Maris* took the ship on July 20 and demanded three and a half million dollars ransom.

A company whose cargo is prevented from reaching its destination will lose revenue. Add to this, the impact



Halifax-based HMCS Ville de Québec escorts the Golina as it carries World Food Program food aid to drought-stricken Somalia.

The Canadian Halifax-class Patrol Frigate HMCS Ville de Québec was deployed to the region of Somalia for several months last Fall to provide naval escorts of World Food Program (WFP) ships carrying life-saving supplies to the area. The government is acting on a request from the UN World Food Program and UN International Maritime Organization. The ship returned home December 21.

**Canadian Forces photo by: Cpl Dany Veillette, Formation Imaging Services Halifax.**

of high-jacking and the cost of paying ransoms to pirates, and it is easy to understand why the cost of insurance premiums for ships that pass through the Gulf of Aden has risen one thousand per cent.

Pirates are becoming more ruthless and better armed. The first fatality was reported by the Malaysian International Shipping Corporation on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, three days after pirates boarded a palm oil tanker. If this continues, shipping may avoid the Gulf of Aden and the Suez Canal for the longer route around the Cape of Good Hope, at the foot of Africa. The cost of extra weeks of travel and fuel would be passed to consumers, who will also have to endure the complications of delayed deliveries.

And these criminals are becoming better armed and better equipped. They use GPS, cell phones, rocket-propelled grenades and even man-portable air defence systems.

Another concern is that these criminals may become agents of international terrorism. This is a serious concern, as this is where the U.S.S. Cole was attacked only eight years ago.

It was against this backdrop that *HMCS Ville de Québec* provided assistance to the millions of Somalis that otherwise would be involved in a humanitarian crisis of monumental proportions.

Defence Minister Peter MacKay announced that the Government of Canada was proud to respond to the request from the United Nations to provide secure and safe delivery of critical food supplies to Somalis in need.

But Nova Scotians, too, can be proud of the contributions of the 253 Canadian sailors, soldiers and air force personnel serving in *HMCS Ville de Québec*. Their vital support of the World Food Programme has helped so many in need. The ship and her personnel are homeported in Halifax, and are part of our proud East-Coast Navy.

As she steams into port before Christmas, the men and women will be welcomed by their families, their colleagues, and their shore-based supporters and commanders.

But we should all welcome *HMCS Ville de Québec* back home. While she flew the Canadian flag from her stern, all who sail in her are Nova Scotians while they serve in our East Coast Navy.

***Note: This op-ed article was published in the Halifax Chronicle Herald on Saturday, December 20, 2008.***

***The Honourable Richard Hurlburt has been replaced as the Minister responsible for Military Relations by the Honourable David Morse on January 7, 2009.***



The Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat (RHIB) from *HMCS Ville de Québec* retrieves the boarding party who have been aboard the food relief vessel *Zang Za San Chang Nyon Ho* as *Ville de Québec* escorts her into Mogadishu, Somalia.

**Photo by MCpl Kevin Paul, Canadian Forces Combat Camera**